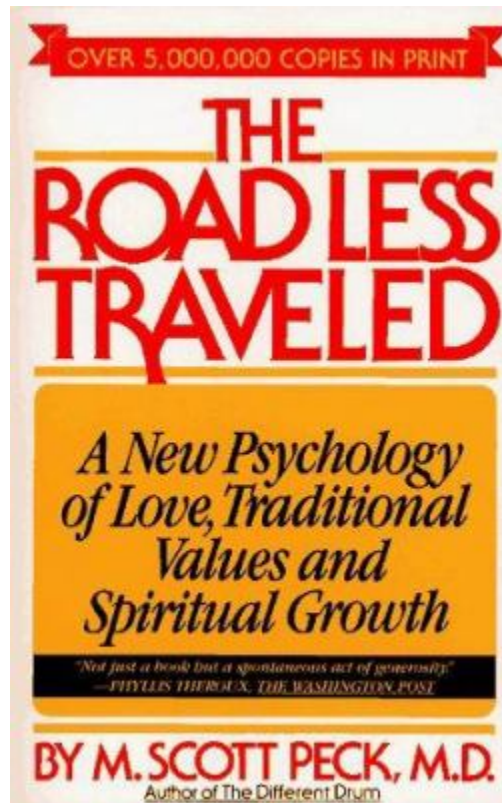


The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck



Introduction

The ideas herein presented stem, for the most part, from my day-to-day clinical work with patients as they struggled to avoid or to gain ever greater levels of maturity. Consequently, this book contains portions of many actual case histories. Confidentiality is essential to psychiatric practice, and all case descriptions, therefore, have been altered in name and in other particulars so as to preserve the anonymity of my patients without distorting

the essential reality of our experience with each other. There may, however, be some distortion by virtue of the brevity of the case presentations. Psychotherapy is seldom a brief process, but since I have, of necessity, focused on the highlights of a case, the reader may be left with the impression that the process is one of drama and clarity. The drama is real and clarity may eventually be achieved, but it should be remembered that in the interest of readability, accounts of the lengthy periods of confusion and frustration inherent in most therapy have been omitted from these case descriptions.

I would also like to apologize for continually referring to God in the traditionally masculine image, but I have done so in the interest of simplicity rather than from any rigidly held concept as to gender.

As a psychiatrist, I feel it is important to mention at the outset two assumptions that underlie this book. One is that I make no distinction

between the mind and the spirit, and therefore no distinction between the process of achieving spiritual growth and achieving mental growth. They are one and the same.

The other assumption is that this process is a complex, arduous and lifelong task. Psychotherapy, if it is to provide substantial assistance to the process of mental and spiritual growth, is not a quick or simple procedure. I

do not belong to any particular school of psychiatry or psychotherapy; I am not simply a Freudian or Jungian or Adlerian or behaviorist or gestaltist. I

do not believe there are any single easy answers. I believe that brief forms of psychotherapy may be helpful and are not to be decried, but the help they provide is inevitably superficial.

The journey of spiritual growth is a long one. I would like to thank those of my patients who have given me the privilege of accompanying them for major portions of their journey. For their journey has also been mine, and

much of what is presented here is what we have learned together. I would also like to thank many of my teachers and colleagues. Principal among them is my wife, Lily. She has been so giving that it is hardly possible to distinguish her wisdom as a spouse, parent, psychotherapist, and person from my own.

SECTION I

Discipline

Problems and Pain

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. *

*The first of the “Four Noble Truths” which Buddha taught was “Life is suffering.”

It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it.

Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.

Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? Do we want to teach our children to solve them? Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems.

Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems.

What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving

problems is a painful one. Problems, depending upon their nature, evoke in us frustration or grief or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair. These are uncomfortable feelings, often very uncomfortable, often as painful as any kind of physical pain, sometimes equaling the very worst kind of physical pain. Indeed, it is because of the pain that events or conflicts engender in us all that we call them problems. And since life poses an endless series of problems, life is always difficult and is full of pain as well as joy. Yet it is in this whole process of meeting and solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems are the cutting edge that distinguishes between success and failure. Problems call forth our courage and our wisdom; indeed, they create our courage and our wisdom. It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually. When we desire to encourage the growth of the human spirit, we challenge and encourage the

human capacity to solve problems, just as in school we deliberately set problems for our children to solve. It is through the pain of confronting and resolving problems that we learn. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Those things that hurt, instruct." It is for this reason that wise people learn not to dread but actually to welcome problems and actually to welcome the pain of problems.

Most of us are not so wise. Fearing the pain involved, almost all of us, to a greater or lesser degree, attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate, hoping that they will go away. We ignore them, forget them, pretend they do not exist. We even take drugs to assist us in ignoring them, so that by deadening ourselves to the pain we can forget the problems that cause the pain. We attempt to skirt around problems rather than meet them head on.

We attempt to get out of them rather than suffer through them.

This tendency to avoid problems and the emotional suffering inherent in

them is the primary basis of all human mental illness. Since most of us have this tendency to a greater or lesser degree, most of us are mentally ill to a greater or lesser degree, lacking complete mental health. Some of us will go to quite extraordinary lengths to avoid our problems and the suffering they cause, proceeding far afield from all that is clearly good and sensible in order to try to find an easy way out, building the most elaborate fantasies in which to live, sometimes to the total exclusion of reality. In the succinctly elegant words of Carl Jung, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering." *

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